

AColyte

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A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College



Songs, Sculptors, and Scripture: It's Good to Be Us

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

From the Ed Sullivan Theater to San Anselmo, California to Abell Library
Jan Term and Spring 2013

Everything is part of it.

--Tom Robbins

What a long, strange trip it's been.

--The Grateful Dead

Wednesday January 9

I stayed up late to watch Ray Wylie Hubbard on the David Letterman Show. I knew he was going to be on that night because I had seen Ray in Sherman in October and he told me then that they had just been booked for Letterman on January 9.

(Here's a quick aside for retiring AC Classics Professor **Jim Johnson**: When Ray told his son Lucas that they were going to be on Letterman, Lucas said, "I'm gonna get a new suit and a pair of alligator shoes." When Ray asked him why, Lucas said, "Because that's what Muddy Waters would do.")

Anyway, Ray told me that Letterman himself had told his producers that he wanted Ray Wylie Hubbard and his band to come on his show and play a song called "Mother Blue's." Apparently, it's common for Dave to personally request musicians that he especially likes.

So Ray and his band, including Lucas, went to New York and played "Mother Blue's" on Letterman. You can see their performance at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r92RkIKm6Wc>

Be warned that the song includes references to strippers as part of Ray's wayward youth. The stripper references are **not** what made me think of the Bible (although you could make a pretty good case that that's what's going on in Matthew 14:6-8).

The part of the song that makes me think of the Bible is at the very end.

The song is about a gold top Gibson Les Paul guitar – the guitar that you can see Lucas playing there on Letterman. And the last lines that Ray sings are:

*I'm very grateful
for the time that I get to share the stage
with my son Lucas.
And I'm very grateful
to be here with
[band members] Kyle Snyder and John Michael.
And I'm very grateful
to Dave Letterman for letting me be on his TV show*

*And the days
that I keep my gratitude higher than my expectations
I have really good days.*

I think that last line is actually pretty significant.

There's something kind of cool about an old reprobate songwriter

- standing on a stage on national TV
- reminiscing about his wayward youth
- including the admission that he never did become a big rock star
- and concluding with the recognition that his best days are when his gratitude exceeds his expectations.

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 says

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

I think that's God telling the Israelites that their gratitude should exceed their expectations.

And I think that might be a relevant point on a campus full of ambitious, talented, amazing, phenomenally gifted people.

I'm just sayin'.

Thursday March 7

I had the great privilege of hearing the Austin College *A Cappella* choir give a concert at San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, California.

Among the Choir's many excellent selections was the premiere of *Break Apart*, by Austin College senior **Evan Runyon**. It is a very interesting and compelling piece. In the third of seven movements, several singers repeat the phrase:

I have enough and I want more.

As I said from a pulpit in Palo Alto later that week, I think "I have enough and I want more" is a great seven-word summary of the sort of selfish, acquisitive greediness to which most humans (and perhaps especially many Americans) are susceptible from time to time.

When I mentioned that line in my sermon, I was referring to Isaiah 55:2a:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

“I have enough and I want more.”

The line also makes me think of the avarice of Israel that is mentioned in Amos 2:6-7a:

*Thus says the Lord:
For three transgressions of Israel, and for four,
I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals –
they who trample the head of the poor
into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way.*

“But I have enough and I want more.”

I haven't thought about those words from Amos in a long time. But “I have enough and I want more” reminded me of the Bible's consistent reminder to keep things in perspective, take the right things seriously, and work hard not to casually justify selfishness and greed.

By the way, you can hear the Choir perform *Break Away* **tonight at 7:30pm in the Beardsley Arena Theater.**

Tuesday March 26

The Austin College Passover Seder dinner (attended by 69 students, faculty, and staff from a variety of religious traditions) included the following prayer:

Dayenu
(Expressing gratitude)

Leader:

Dayenu is an important Passover prayer about gratefulness. The word Dayenu means, “it would've been enough”, or “it would've sufficed.” In a traditional Passover seder, the Dayenu prayer might look like this:

Table Leader:

How many levels of favors has the Omnipresent One bestowed upon us!

*If He had brought us out from Egypt,
and had not carried out judgments against them,
it would have been enough.*

Table members: Dayenu!

Table Leader:

*If He had given us their wealth,
and had not split the sea for us,
it would have been enough.*

Table members: Dayenu!

Table Leader:

*If He had supplied our needs in the desert for forty years,
and had not fed us the manna,
it would have been enough.*

Table members: Dayenu!

Table Leader:

*If He had given us the Torah,
and had not brought us into the land of Israel,
it would have been enough.*

Table members: Dayenu!

Table Leader:

*If He had brought us into the land of Israel,
and had not built for us the Temple,
it still would have been enough.*

Table members: Dayenu!

Leader:

*The idea of Dayenu, or gratefulness, can be easily
extended to anyone's life.*

(At your table, each person should say something for which they are grateful. We will then sing Dayenu together)

*Da-da-yenu, Da-da-yenu, da-da-yenu
dayenu, dayenu, dayenu*

I have to confess that – as I played guitar so everyone could sing *Da-da-yenu* – I thought about Ray Wylie Hubbard.

It's not far at all from "Dayenu!" (it would've been enough) to "*And the days that I keep my gratitude higher than my expectations I have really good days.*"

April 7

And then I met the sculptor James Surls.

Surls came to campus on Tuesday and shared his vision for his work of art "From the Center," recently reinstalled in the foyer of the College's Abell Library Center [see above]. He originally installed the piece on the campus in 1989 as an outdoor sculpture. After it was damaged by the elements, Surls restored the piece and had it returned to campus in fall 2012. The 1,200-pound sculpture begins as three single buds that grow and stretch upward to more than 15 feet of rising petals.

It's a cool sculpture and I encourage you to check it out.

And James Surls is a piece of work himself.

He gave a (sort of) formal talk at lunch and then a bunch of us went to Abell Library to see "From the Center" and he talked some more.

He said a lot of good stuff.

And I kept thinking about the Bible (it's an occupational hazard).

Surls talked about the importance for artists of "understanding the pattern;" of "figuring out the code of how something works."

I thought about Psalm 19:1-6

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.*

I think maybe the psalmist "understands the pattern" and has some ideas about "the code of how things work."

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In describing "From the Center" – the piece we now have in Abell library – Surls said, "You are the center of your own universe."

I don't think that was just pure selfishness or solipsism. I think he meant that

- none of us can fully see except through our own eyes and
- each of us is a sufficient subject capable of participating fully in the world.

I thought of Genesis 1:26

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

I know that the whole “dominion” notion has led to all kinds of wastefulness and insensitivity, but even as we think about the ways that humans have abused our context (from our relationship with this planet to our relationship with other living things) those thoughts take place between our ears.

I think when Surls says “You are the center of your universe” he means “you are more capable of affecting the details of your life than anyone else is. Do it.”

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Surls said, “I have many friends who are atheists, but I’m not.”

Psalm 14:1 says

*Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God.”
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
there is no one who does good.*

I know that’s in the Bible, but I think that’s a dangerous place to stand. Like James Surls, I also have friends who are atheists, but I’m not. I don’t think my atheist friends are fools who do no good. In fact, I often suspect that I don’t believe in the same god that they don’t believe in.

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Just a few seconds after mentioning his atheist friends, Surls said, “The concept of Something greater than I am is so terrific that I cannot abandon it.”

Psalm 139:5-6:

*You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

Psalm 139:17-18:

*How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they
are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you*

I agree, James. It’s a terrific concept. Even if I’m the center of my own universe, I’m not the center of everybody’s.

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While talking about the value of sharing ideas and the dangers of claiming to own, or wanting to protect, too much, Surls acted out a hypothetical conversation:

“I have an idea.”
“Why don’t you tell everybody?”
“They might steal it.”
“Do you only have one?”

His point was that everyone does better when information and ideas are readily available and easily shared.

That gave me a new perspective on Matthew 25:24-28.

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

I think Surls' point, and Jesus' point—a good point that is very much supported by the work of Steven Johnson on innovation in *Where Good ideas Come From* and *Future Perfect*—is that everybody does better when our first instinct is to share rather than to hoard, when we act from a perspective of abundance rather than scarcity.

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But this was clearly my favorite quote of the day.

While discussing a sculpture of his called "Working in the Garden" Surls talked about his ambitions to create a garden that could be seen from space.

"I wanted to make a garden that aliens would want to visit."

Isaiah 60:3:

*Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Why not create something that others—even strangers—will want to see and experience?

*We ask ourselves,
who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are we not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small doesn't serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest
the glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone.
And as we let our light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fears,
our presence automatically liberates others.
--Marianne Williamson*

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So it's been that kind of a semester so far.

I am grateful for the work that I get to do here.

I am grateful for friends, colleagues, and co-conspirators.

It's good to be us.

Until Next Time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Trying to Keep My Gratitude Ahead of My Expectations,
Thanks for Reading to the End,
Dayenu Y'all,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain and Director of Church Relations